

Divorce, Depression, Death and Job Loss

Isaiah 43:1-7



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I don't watch this television program very often, but there was this one episode of *Will and Grace* that was devoted to the invention of a subway seat cushion. It reminded me of a trip Kathy and Ben and I took to Sacramento a few months ago in search of a new desk chair for my home study. I had read about chairs that were 'ergonomically' designed, and the chair I have been using, aside from falling apart, provides almost no lower back support. So we went into this really cool store and tried out these really cool chairs. I had thought I would be willing to splurge and spend maybe \$300 for a good quality chair. Boy, was I in for a surprise! Try \$900. Hey, it was a great chair, it had this silicone gel in the seat that conformed to your shape, and almost everything about the chair was adjustable. Very cool. We enjoyed the chair and the people at this really cool store and then left when I began to think about how my '91 Ford is falling apart.

The chair raised for me the question of how much I would be willing to shell out for comfort. If I was open to spending some dough on cushion comfort, what I be willing to shell out for peace of heart, mind and soul? The Isaiah text for today isn't about silicone gel in seat chairs, but he is addressing a people who are in dire need of deep comfort. They're a people whose despair is driven by truly earthshaking concerns. Their nation has been broken and scattered. Their homeland, community and families are in danger - even their very lives. God says that when they pass through raging waters and walk through scorching fires, his presence will be with them. He will protect and restore them, for he is the one who has created and formed them - he is the LORD their God, the Holy One of Israel, their Savior.

'Do not fear,' says the LORD. 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.' *Here* is deep comfort for a hurting and hopeless community. You see, it's easy to forget with our new economy and wealth and considerations about ergonomic chairs that our neighbors may be experiencing real agony.

People we know are 'passing through the waters' as it says in Isaiah 43, through the raging and overwhelming rivers of divorce, depression, death, and job disillusionment. Couples whose marriage grows colder and colder and then shatters like a block of ice. Young parents who lose a cherished child to killer cancer. The retiree who becomes isolated, depressed and then suicidal. The computer techie who makes a stupendous salary but absolutely dreads the thought of going to his cubicle each day.

Others are walking through fire - through the flames of family conflict, spousal abuse, financial difficulties and life-threatening disease. Picture the frustrated father locking horns with his defiant teenager, the twenty-something wife who shows up at church with strange bruises and a chipped tooth, the young professional who has maxed out his credit cards and can't seem to pay his bills, the middle-aged man who is slowly wasting away because of AIDS.

These are our neighbors, people feeling pain as they pass through the waters and fires. They're not turned on by the tantalizing silicone gel that turns an office chair into a 'puddle of your own flesh' (as the advertisement for one of the chairs declares). Instead, they want simply to keep their flesh in one piece, out of the searing flames and the raging rivers that threaten them every day. What concerns them is surviving, not sitting.

Perhaps the same is true for us. Maybe our own quest for comfort goes beyond the superficial. Along with all those in crisis around us, we are challenged to dig deep into this passage from Isaiah - a passage that promises to give us a way through fires and waters, as well as a shot of strength and comfort in the face of trouble.

The good news is that we begin in a privileged position. Not a bad place to start. God created you, insists Isaiah. He formed you. He called you. He redeemed you. No matter how bad life gets - no matter how many divorces, deaths, disillusionments and disappointments we face - *nothing* is going to change this connection we've been given. We can't be pulled down from our position as created, formed, called and redeemed children of God.

Raging water can't do it. Neither can fire. We can't even be dragged down by a psychotic boss or an abusive spouse. God says to us: "You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." That's a permanent commitment from the Creator of all that is in heaven and on earth.

And if, at any point, this commitment isn't enough, then we also have a solid reassurance that God is taking aggressive action in our lives. That's why the promise in Isaiah is so powerful: When you pass through the waters ... the waters of divorce, death, depression, and disillusionment ... I will be with you, says the LORD. When you pass through the rivers ... the rivers of failing marriages, dying children and despair-filled days ... they shall not overwhelm you. I will be with you to bring new love, new life, new opportunities, new hope.

Jesus is an active God, not just a passive presence. When you walk through fire you shall not be burned - even if the fire is conflict, abuse, bankruptcy or disease. The Holy Spirit is always working to bring peace out of violence, good out of evil, and life out of death. Although we will certainly feel the heat, and may even get singed, with the Father at work in our lives the flames shall not consume us.

And *that's* not all. Sometimes we ourselves get to act as channels of God's amazingly active involvement in human life. Through the divine-human partnership that God desires, we bring forth the power of God and reveal the presence of the Lord to a neighbor who is in danger of destruction. When Sister Helen Prejean in *Dead Man Walking* asked the condemned man if he wanted her to be present at his execution, he said yes. She went on to tell him. 'At that last moment, Patrick, look into my eyes and I will be the face of Christ for you.' We can be that for each other, all the time.

The quest for comfort always ends here - in the presence of the God who creates, forms, calls and redeems us and who works actively and aggressively for good in our lives. The ultimate goal is not ease for our lower backs but deep faithfulness - the deep faithfulness of Almighty God.

So, in the end, where do you really want to sit? In a puddle of your own flesh? Or in the lap of God?

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